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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION ROUND-UP: THAIS TO RESHUFFLE  
GOVERNORS, GENERALS; EU BROUHAHA

REF: CHIANG MAI 143

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, reason 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) This month, Thai authorities announce two important sets of personnel decisions. The Ministry of Interior each September announces the transfer of governors (who are appointed MOI officials, not elected) and other local administration officials. There were rumors that governors in provinces that did not support the constitution would be punished in the reshuffle, but this does not appear to be the case, based on our analysis of the moves announced yesterday.

The next big announcement expected later this month is the Army reshuffle; junta head GEN Sonthi has reached the mandatory retirement age (although he will remain as chief of the Council for National Security until the new government is installed) and the announcement of his successor is eagerly awaited. Right now, the front runner appears to be the Army Chief of Staff who, while close to GEN Sonthi, was not one of the coup leaders. In other news, the EU's proposal to bring monitors for the parliamentary elections appears to have foundered. The EU's insistence that the RTG sign an MOU viewed as removing monitors from the scope of Thai law has provoked a nationalist outcry in the media and some of the ministries. The EU's efforts to smooth over the controversy are probably too little and too late. END SUMMARY.

INTERIOR MINISTRY RESHUFFLE

2. (SBU) The Interior Ministry, which appoints governors to oversee affairs in Thailand's provinces, announced the results of its yearly personnel reshuffle on September 4. The results of the reshuffle had been eagerly anticipated, as many observers expected the Interior Ministry to punish governors and vice governors in the 24 provinces where a majority of voters did not support the constitution in the August 19 referendum.

3. (SBU) The promotion results demonstrated unfavorable referendum results did not significantly impact the gubernatorial careers of Interior Ministry officials. While four governors from provinces that voted against the

constitution were demoted, eleven such governors and vice governors were promoted. Notably, the governors in the northeast provinces of Buriram and Nakhon Ratchasima, where the referendum passed despite strong opposition from local politicians, were neither promoted nor demoted. Similarly, the governor of Chumphon, which overwhelmingly supported the new constitution, was actually demoted to a less significant position in the Ministry.

14. (C) The promotion results are likely more indicative of ministerial favoritism rather than a result of vindictive punishment. In Chiang Mai province, for example, where voters rejected the constitution by a strong margin, Governor Vichai Srikwan was promoted to head an important election administration body (reftel). Some ministry officials felt his promotion was a result of his close connections to Council for National Security (CNS) Chairman General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. Ministry insiders told us on September 5 that they believed the reshuffle decisions were a result of turf battles between senior Interior Ministry officials, and were not the result of poor performance during the referendum or interference by the CNS.

#### ARMY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF RUMORS

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15. (U) Among the most closely watched storylines in recent weeks has been speculation concerning who will replace CNS Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army (RTA) Sonthi Boonyaratglin when he retires from the Army on September 30. According to RTA custom, Sonthi will nominate his successor. Three senior Army Generals, Assistant Army Commanders-in-Chief Generals Saprang Kalayanaramitra and

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Anupong Poajinda, and Army Chief of Staff General Montri Sungkhasap have emerged as the leading candidates. (Another contender, CNS Secretary-General and MOD Permsec Winai Phattayakul, appears to have taken himself out of the running, with his continued protestations that he does not want the job.)

16. (C) While the position of Commander-in-Chief of the RTA is recognized as the most powerful in the Thai military, the position has taken on added importance after last year's coup. Some reports indicated that a key factor in General Sonthi's decision may be loyalty, as some believe that former Thai Rak Thai elements may have a good chance of a very strong showing in the upcoming general elections. With the possibility of PPP electoral success, various reports pointed to General Sonthi selecting a successor he considers loyal and with integrity in order to protect the CNS from retribution from Thaksin supporters if they should win enough seats to form the next government.

17. (U) Speculation regarding the next Army Commander was briefly diverted last weekend when General Sonthi reportedly stated he would not decline a request for him to stay on as Commander past his retirement date, as others have done before him, if the government asked him to stay on. The most recent example is General (RET) Prem Tinsulanonda, who received a one-year extension in 1980. Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont quickly squelched the idea, however, saying the government would not choose that course.

18. (U) General Saprang, the most senior officer of the leading candidates, initially emerged as the favorite due to loyalty to General Sonthi and his firm anti-Thaksin positions. General Saprang's divisive personality and controversies generated during his tenure as chairman of the state telecommunications company and the Airports of Thailand may have worked against him and appear to have presented Generals Anupong and Montri the opportunity to pull ahead as frontrunners.

19. (U) General Anupong, former commander of the King's

Guards, was favored recently was commander of the Thai First Army, a key element in the 2006 coup and is also reportedly close to General Prem, President of the influential Privy Council.

¶10. (C) General Montri, while considered loyal to General Sonthi, was not part of the CNS and many considered him a dark horse candidate. Nonetheless, General Montri's prospects have ascended because, while not seen as the most adept or powerful of the candidates, a source indicated that some in the mainstream Army favor him as he is considered to be professional. General Montri also does not carry the political baggage of being a coup maker -- considered helpful to smooth the transition back to democratic rule -- and his selection would not likely cause a rift within the RTA. Despite the continually evolving situation, it appears that General Montri has evolved into a prime candidate with General Anupong in close contention.

EU ELECTION MONITORS BROUHAHA  
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¶11. (C) The EU proposal to bring election monitors for the parliamentary elections has run into a perhaps fatal obstacle. The EU proposed to bring a monitoring mission weeks ago, and initially got a positive response from Thai officials. However, the dialog turned sour after the EU forwarded a generic MOU for the Thai to sign. The Thai side took umbrage at some of the conditions; we understand, for example, that the draft included language guaranteeing the observers access to "all meetings at all levels of election administration." Some Thai officials took their complaints public, and media reports further exacerbated what has become a nationalist backlash against the proposal. Commentators have questioned why the EU is suddenly so interested in Thai elections, which they have never observed before, and even implied that former PM Thaksin, from his London residence, is somehow manipulating the EU. One legal scholar suggested

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that such an MOU would require approval from the National Legislative Assembly, under the terms of the new constitution. The EU, belatedly, tried to explain publicly that the MOU was a draft and could be modified by the Thai side, but it may be too late to remedy the situation.

¶12. (C) We understand that the EU and the RTG will meet on Thursday. At this point, the Thai position is that EU observers are welcome like anyone else, but the Thai government will not sign an MOU that they say removes the observers from the scope of Thai law and enables them to dictate to the Thai election commission. The EU says that it cannot send a delegation without an invitation and an MOU. The EU shows indications that it is ready to give up, which is unfortunate. The RTG will likely be saddled with the accusation that it barred foreign observers, and the incident will add to the list of grievances the RTG and the EU are holding against each other.

BOYCE